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Forging the Crescent Bridge: Pakistan and Malaysia's expanding strategic partnership

By **Phar Kim Beng, Luthfy Hamzah** October 8, 2025 @ 6:15pm



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif attend a joint press conference at the Perdana Putra building in conjunction with his official visit to Malaysia. The six Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed in Kuala Lumpur between Malaysia and Pakistan extend far beyond economic cooperation to include education, technical training, information and communications technology, halal collaboration, and cultural exchange. — BERNAMA

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THE British Empire once ruled over Malaysia and Pakistan, both, embedding legacies that were later reshaped through the respective nationalisms of Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Tunku Abdul Rahman.

Yet, even centuries before that, Malaysia had felt the presence of other European powers — Portugal and the Netherlands — whose colonial forays shaped its maritime geography and commercial dynamism.

Geography, as always, is destiny. Pakistan and Malaysia command two of the world's most critical maritime arteries. Pakistan fronts the Arabian Sea, linking the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, the world's most vital chokepoint for energy flows.

Malaysia, on the other hand, guards the Strait of Malacca, through which nearly one-third of global trade passes daily. These waterways are also geostrategic lifelines that demand continuous vigilance, technological sophistication, and coordinated defence planning.

The digitalisation of warfare, the rise of autonomous maritime systems, and the intensifying competition among naval powers in the Indo-Pacific only reinforce the need for states like Malaysia and Pakistan to modernise their naval capabilities jointly.

The six Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed in Kuala Lumpur between Malaysia and Pakistan extend far beyond economic cooperation to include education, technical training, information and communications technology, halal collaboration, and cultural exchange.



They reflect a shared determination to deepen strategic trust and expand cooperation across both civilian and defence sectors.

The Joint Statement, issued during Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif's recent official visit to Kuala Lumpur, reaffirmed both countries' commitment to strengthening defence ties through the Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) – including training exchanges, capacity-building, and institutional dialogue between their respective armed forces and defence academies.

In this sense, defence remains a key strategic pillar, complementing the broader efforts in education and trade that now define the Malaysia–Pakistan partnership.

Pakistan's experience in managing the triangular dynamics among China, the United States, and the Middle East provides valuable lessons especially as Kuala Lumpur navigates between Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, Washington's Indo-Pacific Strategy, and the broader economic magnetism of the Gulf.

Islamabad's balancing act – anchored in pragmatism and informed by decades of realpolitik – offers a framework for smaller powers like Malaysia to sustain autonomy while engaging multiple partners simultaneously.

Malaysia, in turn, offers Pakistan an example of regional embeddedness – the art of transforming strategic geography into cooperative diplomacy through the Asean framework.

Since Pakistan became a member of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) in 2004, it has observed how Malaysia and its Asean counterparts have built consensus mechanisms, preventive diplomacy measures, and non-interference norms that provide stability amidst geopolitical flux.

For Islamabad, the ARF remains a valuable platform for engaging with East Asia while deepening its credentials as a responsible regional actor.

The emphasis on defence education within the new framework of cooperation deserves particular attention. In a world where the boundaries between civilian and military technologies are increasingly porous, cross-sectoral learning is essential.

Malaysian defence academies can benefit from Pakistan's experience in nuclear security, cybersecurity, and aerospace development. At the same time, Pakistani institutions can learn from Malaysia's emphasis on humanitarian assistance, maritime domain awareness, and multilateral defence diplomacy.

Such exchanges go beyond tactical collaboration – they build intellectual capital and strategic empathy. Defence diplomacy, when rooted in knowledge, can serve as a bridge between societies, not just armies, and will be further strengthened through the institutional mechanisms reaffirmed in 2025.

The logic of Pakistan's eastward engagement aligns naturally with Malaysia's own regional outlook.

Islamabad's aspiration to become an East Asia Summit (EAS) partner – potentially as a Strategic Dialogue Partner – would position it alongside nations like India, Japan, and Australia in shaping the future of the Indo-Pacific region.

This ambition, shared by Türkiye, signals the emergence of a new arc of Muslim-majority states seeking greater participation in Asia's security architecture.

For Asean, and Malaysia in particular, this represents a unique opportunity to foster cross-regional cooperation that connects the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia through shared frameworks of peace, development, and dialogue.

The Malaysia–Pakistan partnership thus stands as more than a defence accord – it is a statement of intent to form a "Crescent Bridge" across the Indian Ocean.

From Gwadar to Port Klang, from the Arabian Sea to the South China Sea, both nations can collaborate on disaster relief operations, counter-piracy initiatives, maritime environmental protection, and sustainable defence industrial cooperation.

In doing so, they also contribute to the broader vision of an Asean–GCC–South Asia dialogue corridor, a concept increasingly resonant as Malaysia chairs Asean in 2025 under Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

If the 20th century was defined by hard power, the 21st will be shaped by intellectual partnerships and moral vision. Malaysia and Pakistan – united by Islam, informed by history, and guided by strategic necessity – now have the chance to demonstrate how defence collaboration can also mean defending peace, pluralism, and shared prosperity.

In nurturing educational exchanges, both nations are investing not only in mutual security but also in the future of the Ummah's intellectual sovereignty – a goal that transcends borders and inspires future generations.

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the New Straits Times

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